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Film as Film in the twenty-first century: the function and evaluation of diegesis and disruption

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The recent death of V.F. Perkins will bring renewed attention to his body of work, including his seminal text (and only full-length book), *Film as Film*.¹ His work first came to attention via his contributions to *Movie*, a journal he cofounded in 1962 with Ian Cameron, Mark Shivas and Paul Mayersberg (and soon to be joined by Robin Wood), yet it was only with *Film as Film*, originally published in 1972, that Perkins fully set out his philosophy and methodology of criticism. Although he reviewed and refined some of the positions taken in that book over the years that followed – such as some important revisions to his 2005 piece ‘Where is the world?’ – he never deviated from its central vision. That vision involved a passionate commitment to a method of interpretation that combined vivid imagining of the fictional world with close attention to artistic techniques of signification. A single sentence from an article originally published in *Movie* will perhaps serve to demonstrate this vision in microcosm: ‘Much of the meaning of [Nicholas Ray’s] *King of Kings* is contained in its intricate pattern of looking, glancing and staring’.² We cannot, according to Perkins, fully appreciate the meaning (either as noun, in the sense of that which a film conveys, or as participle, as in how a film goes about being meaningful) of a fictional film without both imaginatively inhabiting its fictional world *and* paying close attention to its formal patterning.

A dedication to clarity was also an abiding feature of Perkins’s work. He spoke in a 2011 interview of his interest in ‘a clarity that can articulate subtlety’, but also of his sensitivity to the fact that ‘it’s easy to achieve clarity if you crudify’.³ Perkins was determined to involve himself in what a very different type of critic has referred to as ‘tak[ing] the risk of the work itself’.⁴ He remained adamant that oversimplification was not a price worth paying for clarity; hence his resistance to David Bordwell’s formalism, about which he observed in 1990 that, ‘As in many other

efforts to put work in the humanities on a Sensible Footing, the task is assumed to involve drawing criticism closer to the natural sciences but according to an all-clocks-and-no-clouds model that scientists themselves reject'.⁵ The arguments put forward in *Film as Film*, then, still have much to offer the thoughtful film student. Revisiting them now is perhaps particularly timely, when it is in some quarters apparently regarded as the case that 'it can surely be said that we are some decades past the time when judgement and taste constituted crucial parts of art criticism and theory'.⁶ Assertions of taste dressed up as arguments are indeed to be deplored; but so is the notion that 'judgement and taste' can, let alone should, be simply and neatly excised from criticism and theory. Perkins's body of work stands as a peerless example of the role judgement and taste can play in reasoned argument.

In what follows, however, rather than simply enumerating the strengths of *Film as Film*, I want to suggest some of its limitations, or rather some ways in which it might be seen not fully to follow its own proposals. I will defend two related propositions: firstly that some of the readings the book proposes could be otherwise framed, given an adjusted set of assumptions (chiefly regarding the nature of diegesis and artifice), without thereby departing from the book's general tenor; secondly that the book's fundamental methodological recommendations are more widely applicable than the author himself allows. Though I will, in what follows, be critical of a number of Perkins's positions, I want to underline at the outset that this is precisely because his work is so effective in stimulating us to think harder and more clearly about how we understand and judge films, and that one could not ask for a finer legacy as a film critic.

Film as Film begins by sketching the early histories of film and of thinking about film, and in doing so makes some sound observations concerning the ontology of cinema. Perkins's contest with 'established theory' may perhaps seem a little brittle to today's reader, when the theoretical landscape looks so very different, but criticisms such as the following (of Rudolph Arnheim) are still valuable:

The manner of recording, here and throughout established theory, is given a quite artificial precedence over what is recorded. It is as if a theory of poetry were to acknowledge that words refer to things but insist that the critical reader should be concerned with their sounds alone.⁷

This should be remembered in the context of current debates about ‘medium specificity’. To say so is not to deny the importance of the medium, simply to argue that its relevance and significance are always relative to the particular questions being asked. The central purpose of *Film as Film* is to argue for a methodology in which critical judgements are obliged to frame any and every evaluation of the relevance and significance of an element of an artwork within the context of the particular questions at issue. But if we are not to give precedence to the cinematic apparatus, how should we consider the ontology of film? We should, suggests Perkins, recognize and celebrate its hybridity: ‘The movie incorporates the real object or fictional event into the medium itself’ (p. 24), and hence that which is ‘presented becomes a part of the manner of presentation’ (p. 25). Respecting the nature of film is an admirable intention for a critic (hence the book’s title), but this respect can easily go astray; the critic should remember that to ‘search for grace through purity contradicts the cinema’s hybrid character’ (p. 58). If there is to be a striving for grace it needs to happen otherwise than through purity.

Perkins’s reminders about the history of film are helpful in this context because of the need always to be sensitive to the complexity of the relationship between what is called illusion and what is called reality when dealing with film (although of course Perkins would be the first to insist that film’s past does not determine its future):

In its conception and at its birth, the motion picture was a curious hybrid: the magic lantern was crossed with the optical toy, and the offspring of this liaison was mated with the camera. The cinema bears to this day (and for the foreseeable future) every mark of its

mixed parentage. The relationship between illusion and reality is usually ambiguous and often chaotically muddled. (p. 42)

This is well put, but I do have some reservations about Perkins's subsequent argument. He writes that:

The attempt to show 'how the very properties that make photography and film fall short of perfect reproduction can act as the necessary moulds of an artistic medium' [Arnheim] puts the emphasis in the wrong place, by making temporary limitations of the cinema's mechanism stand in for a coherent view of its *artistic* disciplines. (p. 57)

Granted, the disjunction between 'perfect reproduction' and artistic reproduction is unhelpful, and Arnheim himself hypostatizes a particular state of cinematic imperfection. But in countering him Perkins, it seems to me, risks implying that the history of cinema's technical devices is one of simple addition – everything as before, plus new possibilities: 'Devices which are necessitated by one set of mechanical limitations become optional, but not unusable, when those limitations are removed' (p. 56). But the significance of shooting a film on black-and-white celluloid today – when to do so is a choice not to use cheaper and more flexible digital means – is not the same as it was when that was the only option available. Perkins recognizes this, but still sees only gain: 'Only with colour as an available resource can we regard the use of black-and-white photography as the result of an artistic decision' (p. 54). Options, however, have been not only gained but lost. Those specific uses of black and white that take their meaning from the presumption that all other films are also black and white are no longer possible: try making a black-and-white film today and not signifying 'art film', at least to some extent. To oppose Arnheim's claim that the situation was previously more limited and therefore better, with the view that things were acceptable back then, if limited, but that the situation is less limited now and therefore an improvement, is undialectical and unsatisfactory. Possibilities change their meaning when limitations change, and vice versa.

But let us move to Perkins's proposals regarding the nature of criticism. He suggests the

following:

To regard criticism positively, as a search for the most satisfactory definitions of function and value, allows an escape from academic systems of rules and requirements. Criteria then relate to claims which the critic can sustain rather than to demands which he must make. ... Anything possible is also permissible, but we still have to establish its value. We cannot assess worth without indicating function. (p. 59)

This proposition gets to the heart of *Film as Film*'s continuing usefulness. The last sentence, in particular, of the above excerpt crystallizes the book's fundamental insight, one that is a powerfully productive guideline for critical writing of any kind. Value is relative but not untethered: we must indicate function, after which it may become possible to assess worth. But, of course – and this will be central to my argument – any indication of function stands just as open to challenge as any assessment of worth. The critic might do well to bear in mind Nietzsche's insistence that all valuing is always a valuing-over. Thus positive criticism cannot escape a simultaneous devaluation, because the very selection of criteria devalues those criteria not selected. Sensible as Perkins's suggestion to regard criticism 'positively, as a search for the most satisfactory definitions of function and value' is, such an approach risks a vulnerability to the charge of turning its own presuppositions into prescriptions if some account is not taken of that which the act of valuing positively has thereby devalued.

Perkins argues that it follows from his position that the critic cannot require a movie to fit his definitions; it's his task to find the description which best fits the movie. The most he can 'demand' from a film is coherence: a structure which points consistently towards the performance of comprehensible functions. Without that, judgement becomes impossible. (p. 62)

This is also a very reasonable assessment of the critic's situation, but the introduction of words such as 'coherence', 'consistency' and 'comprehensible' makes the situation very tricky if we are to

avoid inadvertently imposing a particular view of what such things might be. The argument about imposing definitions onto a film also applies to metacritical statements such as this, and we need to be just as careful about the definitions of the terms by which we regulate our criticism as we are about those we use to conduct it. The relationship between coherence and consistency, in terms of how we judge divergence of tone, diegetic mode, and so forth, is particularly delicate. Perkins's associate at *Movie*, Robin Wood, declares – and I think Perkins would have entirely agreed – that he does not 'see how incoherence can possibly ever be regarded as an asset'.⁸ Wood's examples of instances where incoherence mars but does not ruin great works (D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise*) might, however, be better described as instances of inconsistency. If coherence can only be predicated of a whole (can anything be *partly* incoherent?), then nothing prevents coherence being developed precisely via inconsistency (which certainly *can* be local – or might even necessarily be so). *Pierrot le Fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965), which Wood declares to be 'a film that teeters on the brink of chaos, its compositional principles being barely adequate in strength or definition to hold together the complex impulses at work', might be an example of this: from 'barely adequate' it surely follows that the film's principles *are* adequately cohesive.⁹ If, then, a successful film is *necessarily* coherent, coherence (or its absence) becomes something that can be declared at the conclusion of a critical investigation (or demonstrated implicitly during the account of one) rather than a critical criterion in itself.¹⁰ At any rate, if our definitions of coherence and comprehensibility are themselves too rigid, we will end up, in spite of everything, requiring films to fit our definitions. This would be precisely what Perkins strives to avoid in *Film as Film*, which he claimed 'is, as far as I know, the first attempt at an aesthetic and evaluative theory of film which is not prescriptive', in contrast to some of his earlier, 'dogmatically prescriptive' writing in *Movie*.¹¹

That this is a very real risk is illustrated by Perkins's treatment of *Play* (Dusan Vukotic, 1962), a short film in which the drawings made by two young children come to life and interact with one another. Perkins states of the film that the 'only rational explanation for its events is that

the battle takes place in the children's minds', which is apparently contradicted by the fact that it nevertheless 'puts the real boy and girl on exactly the same level as the animated drawings' (p. 63). Aside from the fact that there is not really anything stopping us using the first explanation if we wish (we would just have to see the film as a composite representation of two minds: 'My car runs over your flower!' 'Well then I'm slashing your car's tyres!'), Perkins here appears to confuse a certain mode of diegesis with rationality itself. That which is shown might well be *impossible* in 'real life', but there is nothing *irrational* about a representation which begins in a realistic mode and then moves into the realm of fantasy or imagination ('what if our drawings could come to life?'). To equate diegetic consistency with rationality risks confusing the notion (itself, of course, a fiction) that a consistent and coherent diegesis directly presents a consistent and coherent world – when of course the latter is actually only an inference made by the willing spectator – with the notion of reality itself. Perkins could be seen to imply that cinematic enunciation is only rational when it pretends not to be enunciation at all. However, the effectiveness of the surprise elicited by the transition between diegetic modes that happens in *Play* is predicated precisely on the *rationality* of the expectation that a narrative mode, once introduced, will be maintained, as well as, crucially, the subsequent recognition that another (equally comprehensible and thus equally rational, though clearly not realistic) mode has been entered.¹² That we are both surprised by *and understanding of* such a transition indicates its rationality. Perkins claims that *Play* 'might be expected to irritate its audience by requiring simultaneous belief in actions which exist on two different levels of credibility', though he does not criticize it for this (his criticisms lie elsewhere, in the fact that, for him, it eventually 'declines into a pretentious cold-war allegory'):¹³ 'In fact the cinema's magic is powerful enough to overcome purely rational objections of this sort' (p. 63). Imagine, however, that the narrative was presented as a short story. Would we be likely to raise such 'rational objections'? Would we not simply say that the narrative procedure chosen by the author began in a realistic manner and moved subsequently into what we could perhaps call magic realism? Perkins's

presuppositions about the nature of diegetic coherence are indicated by his distinction between rationality and magic, which muddles the distinction between the rational and the irrational, in terms of the way we comprehend narrative, with that between realistic and fantastic (or magical) modes of diegesis. In this context, the rational and the magical are two sides of two quite different distinctions, but Perkins treats them as two sides of a single distinction. It seems to be this confusion that leads him to attribute irrationality, quite inappropriately, to *Play*.

This might seem a quibble about a particular understanding of the word ‘rational’, but I think it has reverberations elsewhere in the view of diegesis that permeates *Film as Film*. Let us look at Perkins’s treatment of *The Children’s Hour* (William Wyler, 1961), which he refers to by its British title, *The Loudest Whisper*. This is the story of the destructive effects that a rumour of homosexuality spread by a young girl has on the lives of two schoolmistresses, Martha (Shirley MacLaine) and Karen (Audrey Hepburn). Perkins objects to the way in which, when Mary (Karen Balkin) whispers the fateful gossip to her grandmother Amelia (Fay Bainter), we cut from the back of the car in which they are travelling to the front with the driver, shielded from the crucial conversation by a pane of glass. (figure 1; figure 2) Perkins objects that this is an unmotivated transition that exists simply to prevent the audience hearing what the granddaughter says: ‘There is, literally, no excuse for the device: we are deprived of what we want to hear and offered no compensatory distraction’ (p. 125). This is not quite correct: Mary begins to whisper *before* the cut; her mouth, shielded by her hand, is pressed right up to her grandmother’s ear, so that we cannot hear what she says in any case. Well, Perkins might say, that only makes the device both arbitrary *and* superfluous; and as he rightly notes, we do not need to hear the words ‘since we are well enough aware that the accusation is of homosexuality’ (p. 125). But what *is* the effect of our being placed next to the chauffeur? I suggest that it evokes something of the nature of gossip. We are aware that a secret (an exciting, shocking secret) is being exchanged, but simultaneously made conscious of our exclusion from that exchange, as well as of the frustration and the desire to be

included that such an exclusion provokes. The front of the car feels airless in its isolation from the communication occurring in the back, making us desperate for the oxygen of inclusion: when the grandmother slides back the glass panel, after the secret has been transmitted, the acoustic changes and we are able to hear more ambient sound. We have been let in to the space of transmission, but all too late. Since the actual nature of the secret is clearly predictable, far from being a ham-fisted method of controlling audience knowledge, the device is in fact an effective way of generating a particular set of sensations and significations.

Nor is this an isolated incident; a very similar device is used later. All the girls are being pulled out of the school by their parents in response to Amelia's spreading of the rumour. Martha and Karen are beside themselves with anguish and confusion, having no idea what could be behind it all. They implore the parents to let them know why they are removing their daughters, but nobody will tell them. Finally Karen manages to persuade one father, who tells her the reason on the path outside the front door of the school. The camera, however, remains behind with Martha, standing just inside the building behind the closed screen door. (figure 3; figure 4) Once again the device evokes the feeling of exclusion and the desire to know, but our position as spectators is shifted. In the earlier scene we were placed with the driver, a member of the little society in question (the society that will be titillated and supposedly threatened by the rumour) but one who is, at this point, excluded from the gossip. The way it provoked our desire to be included illustrates something about the impulse which causes gossip to spread. But now the desire to know belongs to one of the offending parties, who are in fact the wounded parties, and the exclusion is even more damaging: denying the accused any knowledge of the charges against them means that the gossip is able to spread unchecked. The fact that a very similar narrative device is used in both instances underlines the formal parallels between these two situations while also emphasizing their emotional and ethical disparity.¹⁴

It is somewhat curious that Perkins's criticism of Wyler's device is contrasted with Alfred

Hitchcock's practice in *Rope* (1948). In that film there is a sequence in which the housekeeper comes close to opening the chest in which the victim's body lies. The camera angle prevents us from seeing what the two protagonists (and murderers) are doing:

The suspense of the scene depends on our being made to wait for the moment when the housekeeper opens the chest. It is heightened by the frustration of our desire to know whether either of the heroes is in a position to observe what is happening and so intervene to prevent catastrophe. (p. 125).

This really is a case of withheld information, unlike the example from Wyler, in which we are so readily able to infer the content of the whisper. Perkins admires the pervasiveness of Hitchcock's control: 'He has placed his actors in such a way that within this setting there is no angle from which the camera could embrace both the corner where the heroes are standing and the housekeeper's passage from sitting-room to dining-room.' (p. 126) This has been well established long before the sequence in question. Hence, for Perkins, the artifice is not as intrusive as it is in Wyler. But one could easily counter that *Rope* is, on the contrary, *saturated* with artifice. The fact that Hitchcock goes to such lengths to engineer the visual restriction in question is only one example among many. The virtuosity is extraordinary, but whether it is felt to result in a wholly engrossing economy of means or a distractingly hypercontrolled atmosphere is an open critical question.

We might compare Perkins's comments on *The Children's Hour* with those on the ending of *La Notte* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1961), which he also sees as an instance of arbitrary exclusion. For him, the film ends 'when it has served the director's purpose but before it has satisfied the spectator's requirements'. 'In *La Notte* the "real ending" is knowable but has been withheld. The picture would need to cover at most another two or three hours in its protagonists' lives in order to resolve the ambiguities of its last sequence' (p. 149). Thus different viewers have different feelings about 'what "actually" happens after the end of the picture, and, as a result, whether the conclusion is optimistic or otherwise' (p. 148). Could not the stimulation of such a situation have been one of

the director's intentions, rather than it being the case that Antonioni's interest was only 'in the crisis itself [...] not in how it can be resolved' (p. 147)? Of course Perkins is comparing *La Notte* with the exemplary integration of narration, diegesis and theme he discovers in *Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, 1959). But no film is fully narratively closed, and the amount of diegetic time necessary for a fuller resolution is irrelevant because diegetic time is only ever a construction. A similar argument could be made about the ending of, say, *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946). Will Wyatt Earp ever return to Clementine? A simple cut to a scene two or three years later could equally well have resolved the ambiguities of this film's final sequence.¹⁵

Perkins is also critical of a lighting change and closeup in *The Criminal* (Joseph Losey, 1960): 'Since the effectiveness of the film depends on our being literal-minded in our response to the image there is nothing to be gained by the deliberate creation of discrepancies' (p. 83). It is not quite clear to me whether Perkins means that the effectiveness of Losey's film in particular relies on a certain literal-mindedness in the audience (in which case he does not argue why this should be the case), or that the effectiveness of all films relies on this (in the sentence before the one quoted he refers to 'the director' and 'the film' in what are clearly general terms), in which case I think he is simply wrong. Consider another case of dramatic and unmotivated lighting change in a different film from the same year: *Sergeant Rutledge* (John Ford, 1960). In this courtroom drama, transitions from scenes set in the courtroom to scenes that directly represent the events being described by the witnesses are preceded by the witness being isolated in a pool of bright light, surrounded by darkness. There is clearly no diegetic motivation for this device. It draws attention to the artifice of the film at the expense of the diegesis. But, equally clearly, it was never intended to represent a diegetic change in lighting, nor was it intended to disrupt the diegesis in such a way that we might begin to doubt its coherence or reliability. It represents, instead, the intensity of each witness's attempt to focus on their memories and the way that their present surroundings fade from their consciousness as they do so. It also, through its repetition, creates a formal device that marks off the

two different timescales of the film, that of the continuing trial and that of the events which led to the trial in the first place. Clearly there can be critical debate on the effectiveness of such a device, about whether its positive qualities do or do not outweigh the disruption of diegesis that it involves, but I do not see how we are justified in making blanket statements such as that the ‘effort of adjusting to an incredible lighting scheme is not conducive to concentration’ (p. 83). Surely the question here has to be ‘concentration on what?’ Incidentally, shortly after his criticism of *The Criminal*, Perkins disparages the use of colour effects in *The Red Desert* (1964) in a similar fashion: ‘We are so busy *noticing* that we respond rather to our awareness of the device than to the state of mind it sets out to evoke’ (p. 85). Given *Film as Film*’s frequent praise for Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964), from the same year, it is odd that nowhere is there any mention of its similarly dramatic colour effects, which are also motivated by character psychology (Marnie’s phobia of the colour red).¹⁶

All narrative is artifice, and Perkins argues for a certain kind of artifice, since there cannot be none at all. But an alternative artifice could also have been effective, and justifiable. The critic cannot merely state that a device is intrusive, but must evaluate how intrusive it is, and to what purpose. Perkins applauds instances where a desired narrative effect, or effect of *mise-en-scene*, is achieved in a diegetically justifiable manner, such as when the lighting of the chicken-run sequence in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1956) ‘is traced to a quite credible source: the headlamps of the cars which other gang members, spectators, have drawn up along the sides of the course’ (p. 84). Such devices, used well, are indeed excellent instances of creative and diegetic economy. But it is equally conceivable that a contrived diegetic excuse for some narrative effect would draw more attention to itself (distractingly and unhelpfully) than a device without any strictly diegetic motivation. Imagine that in the Wyler film we had been prevented from hearing the girl’s whisper because another car passed by on the other side of the road, the noise of its engine drowning out the conversation. In such an instance it is at least possible that the introduction of a diegetic event

purely for a specific narratological purpose would, though entirely ‘plausible’, be far more artificial than the use of a device without diegetic motivation.¹⁷ Perkins in fact insists on a related point: ‘The fictional world is not some inert matter to be galvanized into significance by the rhetorical manipulation of the movie’s language’ (p. 130). Certainly the resistances of diegesis to manipulation are very interesting, and this is because the fictional world only exists through the collaboration of the viewer’s imagination. But the film’s rhetoric also helps *produce* the world: we cannot entirely separate world and rhetoric because the nature of the world can only be inferred from what the film shows us.¹⁸ This is not to say we cannot feel rhetoric and world to have an unhappy relationship, but rather that if we wish to claim this about a film, we need to recognize that this unhappy relationship itself comes about through the film’s rhetoric.

This fact is insufficiently recognized in an alternative, recent account of the question of films and worlds: Daniel Yacavone’s 2015 book *Film Worlds*. Yacavone’s distinction between the ‘world-of’ and the ‘world-in’, between ‘films as artistic worlds distinct from fictional story-worlds’, sidesteps exactly the questions of diegesis and credibility with which I am concerned here, and in fact often displays a surprisingly simplistic view of the ontological stability of the fictional world.¹⁹ He writes, for example, that ‘Cinematography, camera placement and movement, editing, staging, design, music, and lighting may all be seen to take up what amounts to a particular *perspective upon* the represented *world-in* of some films’.²⁰ But these elements are also the only means by which we have access to the world-in at all! Yacavone is talking here about devices that draw attention to themselves, but this relies on a background of normative narrative strategies, which must themselves give a particular ‘perspective upon’ the world-in. Hence the world-of is logically (at least with regard to reception) prior to the world-in: we postulate the world-in as a consequence of the world-of, rather than seeing the world-in and then examining what sort of perspective on it we are afforded by the world-of. Hence the critic cannot merely identify diegetic motivation or the lack thereof when judging such instances of tension between diegetic credibility and evident artifice.

Indeed, in his later work Perkins recognized this and articulated the situation thus:

Because the world is created in our imaginations it need not suffer damage from any foregrounding of the devices that assist its creation. We can, if we will, glide over inconsistencies and absorb ruptures, or delight in them. It is not difficult to see the image on the screen simultaneously as a world and as a performance. We do it all the time.²¹

Pace, perhaps, an argument in the same essay that ‘understanding the events of a movie as taking place in a world is a prerequisite of the intelligibility not only of plot but also of tone, viewpoint, rhetoric, style and meaning’, I would only amplify this by saying that the possibility of making inferences based on our world that are appropriate to a given fiction is not predicated on the completeness, coherence or consistency of the fictional world, nor is it undermined if the relationship of that world to our own is symbolic or allegorical.²² Consider, for example, the emotional intelligibility of *Waiting for Godot*, or of *Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012).

Both in *Film as Film* and in his later writing on film worlds, Perkins omits any serious consideration of the extent to which what he proposes applies to less naturalistic or more fantastic cinema. He does consider *The Wizard of Oz*:

The physiologies of a man of tin and a man of straw – together with the threats from rust, fire or loss of stuffing – are easy to comprehend; and in Oz, as in Kansas or Coventry, the same things count as evidence of nerve, brain or heart.²³

This is quite right, but the danger of extrapolating such a position is that it could easily slide into an excessive literal-mindedness that would, for example, fundamentally misconstrue allegorical worlds. In *Film as Film* Perkins strays near this territory with his criticism of the stone lions in *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925): ‘If we interpret the image in context, the lion has dozed contentedly throughout the massacre’ (p. 104). Clearly this is a deliberately lumpen objection, intended to highlight the artificiality of the effect. But it is a very curious objection to make to a film whose every shot, as Sam Rohdie puts it, is ‘at once within the diegetic boundaries

of the film and going beyond it'.²⁴ Hence Perkins's objection that 'Unattached stone lions had no place in a film which undertook to convey ideas and experiences through the presentation of experiences believably undergone by a group of rebel sailors' (p. 189) is bizarre, because the film clearly does *not* attempt exclusively so to do. Eisenstein's focus on the shock of confrontation, on the creation of new effects and the generation of response in the viewer precludes any such overriding commitment to the 'believable'; he wrote in 1926 of the way that 'individual elements of affect' do not, in *Potemkin*, appear 'within the story (in the generally accepted sense of the term)' but are, rather, 'strung along the "story carcass"'.²⁵ In this context we should also note that we cannot *a priori* even assume that the people who appear in a film are meant to be characters as we ordinarily understand that word, and thus to possess, fictionally, a world. Not all theatres work that way – certainly not Noh theatre, or indeed the Proletkult theatre in which Eisenstein worked before moving into cinema. Nor did he forget all that he learned there:

The characters in *Strike* are not characters in the usual way. Essentially they are exaggerations, caricatures and in that sense rather than the actors seeking to realistically play a part, create a 'person', they act to distort, to make emphatic (over-acting), grotesque and comic (in the sense of clowning about).²⁶

Given his preference for synthesis, Perkins is approving of instances where the narration reinforces what other elements of the film are telling us about a character or situation. He writes of another sequence in *Rope* that 'the flashy precision of the camera effect informs our view of Brandon; the split-second control of the image becomes a projection of Brandon's evil assurance and calculation' (pp. 88–89). It seems, then, that stylistic excess is acceptable if motivated diegetically (like those car headlamps in *Rebel Without a Cause*), or by character, whether metaphorically (Emma losing her hat in *Johnny Guitar* [Nicholas Ray, 1954] [p. 78]) or mimetically, as in *Rope*. But what of irony or other narrative 'comment'? Perkins does claim that his view can incorporate irony, speaking for example about an ironic effect of editing in *Marnie* (p.

100). But does not irony often rely on just the kind of separation between diegesis and narration that Perkins so often criticizes? Nobody would expect a narrator in a novel to eschew explicit or implicit comment on the action or characters, whether or not the narrator is an identified diegetic character. What prevents something analogous from happening in film?²⁷ Perkins asserts that synthesis, ‘where there is no distinction between how and what, content and form, is what interests us if we are interested in film as film’ (p. 133). Such a situation is predicated on ‘our common experience of the world’ (p. 187). But what are we to do if a director is interested in that which in our experience of the world is *not* common? Or if, as Rohdie argued in his review of *Film as Film*, a director (such as, he suggests, ‘Eisenstein, Vertov, Makavejev, Straub, Marker, Rocha’) attempts not to collapse content and form, not to synthesise, but instead to work directly with the earlier stages of the dialectic, with thesis and antithesis, to ‘present a conflict in the film text, or, more precisely, locate contradictions between, in *Movie* terms “device” and “content”’?²⁸

At its worst, *Film as Film* strays towards the profoundly ideological position of arguing for the possibility of a non-ideological standpoint: ‘It is a man’s own, and legitimate, decision whether to concern himself with any medium for its own sake. [...] He may have no use for the cinema except as moral propaganda, or as an elaborate light show’ (p. 187). Must we dismiss such films from consideration as films? On the contrary, given that the ‘weakness of much criticism is its insistence on imposing conventions which a movie is clearly not using and criteria which are not applicable to its form’ (p. 188), the task is to search for appropriate and applicable criteria. Such a search need not lead us merely to exchange Perkins’s interest in synthesis for an approach which, as Rohdie characterizes modernism, treats ‘the art object as the prime material reality’ and therefore concentrates ‘on the “text” as a construct of signs and as the locus of any problem about art and aesthetics’.²⁹ Terry Eagleton has argued that the very concept of the aesthetic (which any interpretation and evaluation of cinema can never wholly escape, should it even try) ‘offers a generous utopian image of reconciliation between men and women at present divided from one

another' at the same time as it 'blocks and mystifies the real political movement towards such historical community', and hence 'Any account of this amphibious concept which either uncritically celebrates or unequivocally denounces it is thus likely to overlook its real historical complexity'.³⁰ Tracing the way that particular films take particular positions or use particular strategies with respect to this dichotomy is surely preferable to focusing either on film as world or film as text to the exclusion of the other position.

The strongest criticism of disruptive effects in *Film as Film* might be the following:

As an illusion-spinning medium, film is not bound by the familiar, or the probable, but only by the conceivable. All that matters is to preserve the illusion. [...] the created world must obey its own logic. There is no pretext, whether it be Significance, Effect or the Happy Ending, sufficient to justify a betrayal of the given order. In a fictional world where anything at all can happen, nothing can mean or matter. (p. 121)

The penultimate sentence here is predicated on the final sentence: the reason why the 'given order' can never justifiably be betrayed is because if it is, then all standards of significance become evacuated of meaning. This I strongly disagree with. At what point can one say that the 'order' has been 'given'? Would it be possible to provide examples of meaningless films where anything can happen?³¹ They cannot exist because films are not infinitely long! Rewatching can always reveal new logics. We might still feel a film was excessively indulgent or insufficiently integrated – perhaps calamitously so – but to say so would be a judgement relative to function (as Perkins insists all judgements must be) and to the balance between various tensions in the film. Indeed, tension and release is (as Perkins would, I am sure, wholeheartedly agree) crucial both to the construction and the effect of any successful film. Why should a variation in degrees of credibility not itself be a source of drama?³² This is, once again, a question of film worlds. In some stories, asking for certain consistencies to apply to the world is not simply unnecessary but inappropriate. This can be demonstrated negatively by the fact that a narrative can surprise us or make a joke by answering

questions about its world which we had, quite reasonably, been happy to leave unasked: much of Terry Pratchett's career was based on doing just that ('A Thaum is the basic unit of magical strength. It has been universally established as the amount of magic needed to create one small white pigeon or three normal-sized billiard balls.')³³ Does a film's reliance on our knowledge of our world mean that it *has* to postulate a gap-free world of its own? To say that Godot exists somewhere in the play's world, and that reasons for his non-appearance must also exist, would be to misunderstand the play entirely – but this does not mean that we therefore see Vladimir and Estragon as merely allegorical or absurdist ciphers that do not inhabit a world.

In 'Where is the world?' Perkins suggests that imagination might cut through this kind of difficulty:

If we insist too much on reason here we shall divorce criticism from experience. It is normal for a movie to stress and sustain the separation between the fictional world and the world of the viewer. Imagination allows the movie to work within that register. But imagination makes other registers available as well. In one such, a world may be suggested whose beings can respond to our watching. In another, the film may have its actors step aside from their character roles and move apart from the fictional world so as to appear or confront us in their own right.³⁴

But this rests on a distinction between reason and imagination as unhelpful as that we saw earlier between reason and magic. To imagine is not to cease to use one's reason; indeed much – one might even say all – rational activity is impossible without the use of the imagination. Perkins might reply that in *Film as Film* he clearly states that he is not providing standards of judgement for any and every film:

The values I have claimed for *Rope*, say, or for *Johnny Guitar*, cannot be claimed, in the terms of this study, for a picture like Godard's *Les Carabiniers*, where the fictional action attempts neither credibility nor the absorption of personal meaning into a dynamic pattern of

action. The degree to which *Les Carabiniers* is to be valued will have to be argued in terms other than those proposed here. (p. 190)

On the contrary, I would argue that *Les Carabiniers* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963) does have to do with credibility, even if it is in the way it strains, stretches or destroys it, and that the film is certainly concerned with relationships of meaning arranged in dynamic patterns. Susan Sontag interprets the return of Michel-Ange and Ulysse from their travels with nothing but a collection of postcards as a ‘gag’ which ‘vividly parodies the equivocal magic of the photographic image’.³⁵ But the gag would have no meaning were it not somehow absurd for them (or indeed for us, with our own holiday snaps) to treat images of valuable things as themselves valuable. The length of the scene and the level of delight the postcards generate are obviously incredible. This means that credibility is not irrelevant to the fictional action, something it does not even *attempt*; rather, the fictional action’s purpose and effect are inexplicable without a consideration of credibility.

There is, then, no reason why the method of *Film as Film*, broadly conceived, could not be brought to bear on, for example, what Perkins himself beautifully describes as ‘the shattered continuities of Alain Resnais’s *Last Year in Marienbad*’ (p. 56). Perkins’s belief ‘that a longing for an all-embracing aesthetic of *the cinema* is the worst part of our inheritance from the major theorists, and a symptom of the immaturity of the discipline of film criticism’³⁶ does not preclude a wider applicability for his methods of articulating and evaluating the aesthetics of certain films than he himself seemed prepared to grant. The fundamental motivation for my criticisms of *Film as Film*, then, are not because I think its project is misguided, but precisely because I think it is well-founded. To insist that it is not possible to ‘assess worth without indicating function’ (p. 59) means that if we seem to encounter something that impedes a particular function, it is incumbent upon the critic to search for alternative motivating functions. These functions might be found to relate to any aspect of our world and any way of existing in or interpreting it. Close reading and detailed investigation of function, pattern and effect in any film need in no way predispose one, *pace* the

Rohdie in 1972, ‘to ignore modern theory and to reject most of the past’.³⁷

There is a famous story about Theodor Adorno at the 1951 Darmstadt summer school for new music. Adorno strongly criticized a piano sonata by Karel Goeyvaerts for its lack of motivic development. It fell to a young Karlheinz Stockhausen to defend the work, pointing out that Adorno was criticizing the work for not being something it was not attempting to be: ‘Professor, you are looking for a chicken in an abstract painting’.³⁸ Perkins might be seen as recommending us to do our utmost to avoid such wild poultry chases, which is certainly good advice. But following this advice does not mean that if we cannot see a chicken at first glance, we must assume all our accumulated avian knowledge to have become instantly irrelevant. On the contrary, we may simply have to think a bit harder about the ways we can put it to good use. I hope to have begun to demonstrate that Perkins’s method is *not* inextricably tied to the notion that ‘we can value most the moments when narrative, concept and emotion are most completely fused [...] where there is no distinction between how and what, content and form’ (p. 133). Or, to put it another way, that we can consider such statements as hyperbole, reading ‘no distinction’ as ‘little distinction’ or, better, as ‘no easy distinction’. This kind of remark might then be seen less as indicating that Perkins’s approach was only applicable to films whose attitude mirrored that exhibited by his writing (films whose efforts are aimed, as Perkins said his were, at ‘mak[ing] the labour disappear’) than as demonstrating his intention to deepen our sense of the complexity of such distinctions.³⁹ My purpose in showing that some of the things criticized by Perkins can be defended without departing from his fundamental methodology has been to argue that, paradoxical as it may sound, demonstrating the limitations of some of the critical judgments in *Film as Film* can serve, forty-five years after its publication, to highlight its undiminished vitality.

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¹ Valuable information on, and tributes to, V. F. Perkins can be found in Alexander Jacoby's obituary for *Sight and Sound*, 5 August 2016, <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/obituaries/vf-victor-francis-perkins-1936-2016>>, as well as at the University of Warwick's Film and Television Studies site, <<https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/archive/vfp/>> and Catherine Grant's *Film Studies for Free* blog, <http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.co.uk/2016_07_01_archive.html> all accessed 28 March 2017.

² V. F. Perkins, 'The cinema of Nicholas Ray', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods: Volume 1* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1976), p. 253.

³ Soenke Zehle, video interview with V. F. Perkins, 2011, <<https://vimeo.com/28979836>> accessed 28 March 2017.

⁴ Nicole Brenez, 'An archaeology of the figure and the figural in cinema after Kracauer', lecture delivered at the Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main, 22 November 2011, <<http://www.kracauer-lectures.de/en/winter-2011-2012/nicole-brenez/>> accessed 28 March 2017.

⁵ Victor Perkins, 'Must we say what they mean?: Film criticism and interpretation', *Movie*, no. 34 (1990), p. 6.

⁶ Swagato Chakravorty, 'Review of Daniel Yacavone (2015) *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2017), p. 153.

⁷ V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972) (Boston, MA: Da Capo, 1993), p. 17. All references to *Film as Film* will be to this edition, and hereafter page references will be given in the text.

⁸ Robin Wood, 'Big game: confessions of an unreconstructed humanist', in *Personal Views: Explorations in Film* (London: Giles Fraser, 1976), p. 19.

⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰ This account would have to be complicated by the question of whether a film can be incoherent in some but not all of its aspects – coherent in diegesis but incoherent in ideology, for example. I am still inclined to the view that when all aspects are considered together then the dissonances and correspondences between them will ultimately have to be judged as either productive of coherence or incoherence. Perkins himself once made an argument about success which is logically similar to that which I am making about coherence: ‘It is nonsense to say that in *Party Girl* Ray’s talent is “squandered on a perfect idiocy” (Louis Marcorelles in, of all places, “Cahiers du Cinéma”). The treatment may or may not have been successful: there is no such thing as an unsuccessful subject.’ Perkins, ‘The cinema of Nicholas Ray’, p. 252.

¹¹ Victor Perkins, ‘A reply to Sam Rohdie’, *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1972), p. 147. Perkins acknowledges that the first drafts of the book were at times excessively prescriptive: ‘To the extent that the published *Film as Film* retains any traces of the prescriptive formulations of my first drafts (minor but not blameless inflections of tone in discussing the details of some examples) those remnants are clearly inconsistent with the whole drive of the book’s argument.’ Ibid.

¹² Noël Carroll has written, correctly, that ‘to find that a film is disunified in certain respects already requires the presumption that it is somehow unified in others’, quoted by John Gibbs and Douglas Pye in their introduction to Gibbs and Pye (eds), *Style and Meaning: Studies in the Detailed Analysis of Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 12.

¹³ A judgement I tend to agree with, though I would incline towards calling it ‘pedestrian’ rather than ‘pretentious’.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that in *These Three* (1936), Wyler’s earlier version of the same story, although the crucial revelation takes place not in the back of a car but in the grandmother’s room, Mary still insists on whispering and therefore the audience is still prevented from hearing what she says. But the fact that no physical screen separates us from Mary and her grandmother at this

moment means that there can be no plausible parallel device deployed later when the children are being removed from school; the later film is formally richer.

¹⁵ I think Hoi Lun Law was right when he suggested to me (in a private communication) that Perkins is wary of the ‘interpretive anarchy’ that devices like those used in *La Notte* might encourage.

¹⁶ Wood discusses the colour effects in these two films in terms of Classical and Romantic traditions during his discussion of *Film as Film* in *Personal Views*, pp. 23–25.

¹⁷ Novelist John Barth has written that he finds ‘the fantastic device of Hamlet’s father’s ghost a good deal more believable than the realistic device of the accidental exchange of poisoned swords in the midst of Hamlet’s duel with Laertes in Act V’, in Barth, *The Friday Book* (New York, NY: Perigee, 1984), p. 223.

¹⁸ I am here using *rhetoric* to refer to the way films are (unavoidably) *shaped*, and to the implications of such shaping, rather than specifically to instances where the film attempts to persuade. This is analogous to the way Paul de Man uses the word about poetry, referring to ‘the study of tropes and figures (which is how the term *rhetoric* is used here, and not in the derived sense of comment or of eloquence or persuasion)’. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 6.

¹⁹ Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press: 2015), p. xxi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²¹ Victor Perkins, ‘Where is the world? The horizon of events in movie fiction’, in Gibbs and Pye (eds), *Style and Meaning*, p. 38.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁴ Sam Rohdie, *Montage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 34.

²⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, 'a personal statement', in Jay Leyda (ed.), *Film Essays*, (London: Denis Dobson, 1968), p. 14.

²⁶ Rohdie, *Montage*, p. 39.

²⁷ This possibility was surely the source of Pasolini's attraction to the concept of free indirect discourse.

²⁸ Sam Rohdie, 'Review: *Movie Reader, Film as Film*', *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1972), p. 139.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1990), p. 9.

³¹ Perkins makes much of the consequences of a betrayal of logic. Certainly, in mathematics, an inconsistency in a proof (where both *p* and not-*p* turn out to be true) is calamitous, for it allows one to draw any conclusion one wants: precisely 'anything can happen'. But this is not the case in narrative cinema, where impossible events *can* occur: consider *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) or *Tokyo senso sengo hiwa* (Nagasi Oshima, 1970). Even in mathematics the situation is not really so clear, as since the 1970s a field of 'inconsistent mathematics' that *can* accommodate inconsistencies has developed.

³² Perkins's criticism of that which distracts is related to his stipulation that 'no game worth watching changes its rules at the players' convenience' (p. 123). Certainly there is a sense in which watching a film is *like* playing a game. But is it *actually* a game, either literally or perhaps in a sense closer to Wittgenstein's language games? I think Perkins relies too heavily on his metaphor here. The distinction that he wants to make a critical principle (that when the rules change we have a flawed film, because were this to happen in a game it would then cease to be a game in any proper sense) might even be what distinguishes fiction from games. What if it is part of a film's method to make us work to discover what the rules are? Is watching a film perhaps less like going to see a game with whose rules we are already familiar than it is like trying to work out the rules while (and by) watching? Football might be easier to come to grips with that way than cricket, but that does not

mean that football is better than cricket.

³³ Terry Pratchett, *The Light Fantastic* (1986) (London: Corgi, 2012), p. 47.

³⁴ Perkins, 'Where is the world?', p. 35.

³⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press: 1977), p. 2.

³⁶ Perkins, 'A reply to Sam Rohdie', p. 149.

³⁷ Rohdie, 'Review', p. 143.

³⁸ Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music* (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), p. 36.

³⁹ Perkins, in Zehle, video interview.